

## The Blank

*There are almost no facts about Theognis. His dates, his home city, the details of his life, and the authenticity of many of his poems are matters of scholarly controversy.*

—Dorothea Wender

Her name was Tara (hence the easy joke).  
Was she the object of my old friend Rob's obsessive love,  
one brief week since they'd first met on the Web?  
—or just the object of his widely (also self-) acknowledged  
obsessiveness purely? All I can report is that  
I came across him mucking through her open purse  
while she was gone one afternoon, in the middle  
of seeking some telltale ribbon or stain,  
a letter, a glittery splat of bijou, that  
went a minor way toward fleshing out the unknown  
who-she-really-was behind the charming surface  
sexuality and lilting laugh. I never did forgive him this  
betrayal of her trust (or just her unconcern?); and yet  
who *doesn't* understand the need to fill the blank,

the teasing emptiness that's spooked us  
and that's challenged us since "sky" and "dark" and, later,  
"map" were emblems of its presence. If the cosmophysics gang  
is right, and Universe and Mind evolve toward thicker  
information-fields...well, like it or not, there Rob was,  
doing his duty. And she *was* frustrating! On her Web site:  
"I'm an orphan." Okay. "I work in cetacean biology."  
Wow—impressive. And that was *it*. No further details.  
Other men in her past? (or her present?) the places  
she'd lived? her schooling? pets? pet peeves?  
her secret naughty fetishes?—it was all absorbed  
in a graceful shrug. As Sam, our reigning smartass queen  
of wisenheimer shtick said, "What's her last name  
—Incognita?" (Hey: I *told* you it was an easy joke.)

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*Nobody knows for certain where or when Wordsworth and Coleridge first met, what the circumstances were, or what was said.*

—Adam Sisman

“Here there be monsters” saith the ancient cartographers, of unexplored terrain; they add depictions of the centaurs and two-headed giants and artfully muscular-coiled dragons inhabiting this X—a guess, the way our own string theory is a guess, perhaps a bright guess and a best guess, but a guess. And the ten-year-old girl is bored of doodling her conjecture of what male pee-pee must be like, she’s crazy for a real-deal look; and her eleven-year-old brother sneaking enthralledly into the ladies room at Thinnegar’s Department Store one Sunday afternoon—the same. And death is a blank, and what preceded Existence is a blank: and so we conjure up a face for God, we argue Big Bang yes-or-no...we doodle, we wildly theorize, we hire P.I.s. “An orphan

has it worst, I think.” A year or so after their breaking-up, I chanced on Tara (newly in town to lecture at the aquarium), and we talked. “They died in my first year. Maybe that’s why I’m so stingy in giving myself away—I have less of it than the rest of you.” Two other things I remember especially. “It’s like a hole in my history is physically present inside my chest...like one of those runaway black holes from an experiment they’re afraid would gobble the world: it eats me more each day. Maybe *that’s* why I’m so dedicated to saving the river dolphin from extinction...a hole I can fight against.” And: “Rob and the purse?” She laughed. “Oh, you should see what *I’ve* done, researching my parents.” *Like...?* “I’ll only say a brick through a window, and fucking several very creepy genealogists.”

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*One in six: proportion of European mammals under threat of extinction.*  
*—a science journal, 2007*

“An then ’e BOPS ’im over the ’ead an TWISTS  
’is schnozzle real friendly-like”—the first meeting  
of Coleridge and Wordsworth, as interpreted by Monty Python.  
Faceted, under the Cubist brush of Picasso, so the two  
of them are set in the sylvan depths like humanoid crystals.  
Elongated, by Modigliani. Winged, by Chagall. The truth  
is, there’s no truth. “Mystery surrounds ‘Kubla Khan.’  
No one can be sure exactly when it was written; no one  
even knows whether it is complete. Coleridge  
describes it as a ‘fragment,’ but there is a case  
for doubting this.” The truth is, choose to be kind  
to another person, and let the rest of it go.  
The truth is clouds and perishing and erasure.  
Draw your own lines and hold firm. The truth is save

the Yangtze River dolphin, if it’s not too late  
to rescue that elegant blue-gray sinuosity  
with the sweetly laconic grin threaded into its snout;  
and it *may be* too late: “There hasn’t been even one  
confirmed sighting in six years,” so the hope  
of finding a breeding pair “has all but vanished.”  
The legend is a princess once refused to marry a man  
she didn’t love, and her angered family drowned her;  
reincarnated into this spritely swimmer, she was known  
now as “The Goddess of the Yangtze.” Well, goodbye  
to the goddess. Goodbye to the poems that Wordsworth  
and Coleridge extemporized on their long walks. And the truth  
is, Tara, we’ve failed your mission. One more hole  
we’ll need to half-ass plug with some frantic invention.

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*Whether or not this story is true is a subject that has been endlessly debated, and can never be resolved, unless new evidence emerges. But of course that does not really matter.*

—Adam Sisman

Sometimes a sensibility and a job are perfect matches; in that way, Rob's obsessiveness—a trial to friend and lover—has its culminant expression as he's driven to fill in the fray and the flaking, here in the bone-bare light of the art museum's restoration lab. It's a pleasure to watch his thread-by-thread exactitude, his grain-by-grain finesse. One day a missing eagle is back in its mythological skies, is skimming above the love-life of the gods for the first time in centuries. Another day, a marble eye stares out of a marble face once more. "Little voids: little patches." *And this?* "I just finished them. Porpoises, we think. Right? Aren't they porpoises?" And then an awkward silence in which neither of us mentions her.

The dolphins that Theognis waxes so jubilant over are oceanic, not freshwater; still, the familial resemblance is strong. "Olympian Zeus, and the Daughters of Inspiration, listen! In my seventh year, on a night of the roundest moon, I went down to the shore of the boundless sea, and there they were, those merry children of Poseidon, leaping as if the water itself had eyes and smiles and could leap. On one the moon shone like a saddle, on her back, and indeed I waded deeply in and she let me astride her, and we circled the bay. This is true. I believed she was mine and no one else's. There are wonders in a life to be remembered." Although let me confess here: I made that up. I couldn't bear the blankness.